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Irma Taddia

Correspondence as a New Source for African History:

Some Evidence from Colonial Eritrea*

Recent developments in African studies take into account a new type of source and the emergence of a new phenomenon in 19th Century Africa such as the birth of a private epistolography¹. I would like to develop this theme in relation to Italian Eritrea by pointing out the importance of private letters in writing the history of the colony and identifying the change in the local way of life as a result of the emergence of private correspondence². Letter writing is part of western culture and European civilisation: the use of correspondence is very poorly documented in Africa before colonialism. Oral culture and oral communication were the most common ways of expression in Africa for several centuries. Even though we are considering an African civilisation with the use of writing, as is the case with Ethiopia, letters have been a very unusual phenomenon up to recent times. So far we have known about official letters exchanged between rulers—Europeans and Ethiopians—in modern times (Rubenson 1987, 1994; Selassie & Appleyard 1979; Appleyard & Irvine 1985), but the use of correspondence among African people is very poorly documented.

An interesting case study is represented by colonial Eritrea. Italian archives permit a reconstruction of the emergence of a private correspondence in Italian Eritrea that gives us many insights into colonised people and their life. The use of letters in the colony mainly concerns the relation-

* This article started as a reflection on “Ethiopian/Eritrean Life and Colonialism: some Aspects of a Biographical Literature”, a paper given at the workshop on “Biography in Eastern African Historical Writing” organised by David Anderson at Oxford University in July 1995. Subsequent field work in Eritrea during my academic leave in 1995-1996 provided a more analytical framework and has inspired new related themes of research. I am particularly indebted to Fratel Ezio Tonini for his assistance to the project in Asmara, Dr. Alessandro Bausi and Dr. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar for their comments and support.

1. For the last trends in African literature see SPAULDING (1993).
2. Eritrea is very poorly investigated, while Ethiopia alone has been considered in this light.

ship between colonised people and colonial government; the great bulk of documentation deals with letters addressed from Eritreans to Italian administrators. This form of correspondence, however, can be also analysed under another relevant aspect, given the fact that, in addition to revealing the political attitude of Eritreans towards colonial government, it clearly points out an unusual aspect of colonialism: that of the lives of African people. In this respect, colonial literature in the form of correspondence also appears to be literature related to a biographical discourse. In fact letters show many aspects of the daily life and offer biographical material that would be very difficult, and indeed impossible, to find in other available sources. This development emerges as significant in modern Ethiopia.

The late 19th century was important in Ethiopia for two reasons: the historical situation leading to Italian colonialism in Eritrea and the emergence of a new type of literature of an informal nature, no longer restricted to court chronicles or religious works alone. In this period Ethiopian literature underwent a radical transformation and took on a modern and secular form³. This process marked the beginning of a new trend as regards the type of sources available to historians. The first intellectuals who could freely express their thoughts emerged in this period. Literature of a private, informal nature appeared in Ethiopia for the first time in the form of diaries, letters and notebooks. Although these literary works are few in number, they are significant as a new trend and express personal opinions about politics for the first time, as well as providing information and biographical records of a private nature that are interesting to analyse. Informal literature, such as diaries and notebooks, came into being during the same period as the development of private correspondence in Ethiopian culture.

Little research has been conducted on biographies and biographical records in the former Italian colonies and this subject has been poorly investigated in the historiography of the Horn of Africa, while biographical work has been very intense in recent literature on colonial Sub-Saharan Africa⁴. Few works therefore are strictly related to biographies, tending rather towards a general analysis of the lives of important political figures in a particular historical context (Marcus 1975, 1987; Filesi 1990; Prouty 1986; Gabre Sellassie 1975; Belaynesh *et al.* 1975). Biographies of important people and figures of power in historical Ethiopia are a seminal field of study, but little is known of less important persons and their daily life. Moreover, little emphasis has been given to colonial Eritrea from this

3. Secularisation in Ethiopian culture emerges only in the 19th century, as noted by many scholars. See TADDESE BEYENE, PANKHURST & SHIFERAW BEKELE (1990); CRUMMEY (1988); BAIRU TAFLA (1987); GARRETSON (1978).

4. See the discussion in the workshop held at Oxford University, "Biographies in Eastern African Historical Writing", 6-7 July 1995 quoted above where I presented the paper: "Eritrean/Ethiopian Intellectual Life and Colonialism: some Aspects of a Biographical Literature".

point of view⁵. A survey of personal reference and biographical matters contained in private correspondence is therefore a stimulating field of study in contemporary Eritrea and reveals interesting unknown aspects of Eritrean history and culture under colonial rule. Particularly regarding Eritrea and the north of Ethiopia, Italian archives are rich in such material and testify to the change of documentation in historical sources (in modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea) available to historians: the transition from official literature—secular or religious—to informal and private documentation dealing with the life of African people.

Another field of study related to biographical records deals with oral research. The Horn of Africa seems to be under-investigated as regards this topic and the great bulk of historical work is still based on official written documentation in colonial archives. Oral historiography lacks serious investigation in the Horn and the use of eyewitness documentation, biographical material, interviews and other alternative sources is rarely organised into systematic research⁶. The way in which African people lived during Italian rule remains to be explored in many respects. On the contrary, available documentation on this subject enables us to analyse the colonial milieu.

What were the reactions of colonised people to colonial domination? In what respects can letters offer an alternative view to the official historiography of colonial Eritrea? We must point out that colonialism, in fact, represents a unique opportunity to highlight the lives of African people. Colonial sources document the changing attitudes of many Africans and clearly introduce a new form of literature and a new style of writing that I am dealing with in this context: in other words, private letters.

I would like to discuss here one aspect of colonial documentation that is of general interest but which has not yet been considered in Eritrean/Ethiopian literature: the biographical material expressed through the exchange of personal correspondence documented towards the end of the 19th Century in colonial records at the beginning of Italian rule in Eritrea. There are at least two different forms to be taken into consideration when analysing literature of biographical origin:

— Colonial biographical literature (in Italian), *i.e.* literature of biographical origin written by colonial civil servants on local authorities and the power structure in colonial Eritrea (the so called “biografie dei capi” in Muslim and Christian areas).

— Local literature related to biographical records (in Amharic or Tigreña) written by Eritrean “sudditi” during the colonial period concerning the most

5. In spite of the fact that Eritrean colonial Archives are the richest, not only within the Horn of Africa, but probably throughout the African colonies.

6. Research based on orality is little developed in the Horn of Africa. For oral documentation in Italian Eritrea, see TADDIA (1996).

original aspect of colonial life: the introduction of a new cultural dimension in Ethiopian literature.

Colonial biographies deal with the upper class in Tegrean society and the precolonial power structure; they consist of short notes containing information about traditional society in order to provide a better understanding of colonised people and a vivid perception of the precolonial system of living. The nature of biographical material collected during colonialism on African societies is common to many colonial countries. Besides this material originating in a colonial milieu for bureaucratic purposes, we can find another relevant set of documentation of local origin dealing with biographical matters. This second case, however, includes letters, and private correspondence can be analysed under the same category of informal documentation in modern Ethiopia that clearly emerges on the eve of colonialism.

I came across some interesting unpublished material in Amharic or Tegrēñña related to the colonial period and consisting of biographical notes, diaries and letters: a documentation rare in Eritrean/Ethiopian literature of the late 19th century (Taddia 1994). Regarding the development of a private correspondence in colonial Eritrea, we can find two different types of letters: on one side the correspondence exchanged among Eritreans themselves during colonialism and on the other side the correspondence between Eritreans and the colonial government⁷. Both aspects are relevant cases and worthy of discussion.

Biographies from Outside: the Role of Colonial Documents

First of all I would like to examine colonial biographical literature: there are many documents of biographical origin in Italian Eritrea conserved in colonial archives which still deserve attention⁸. Colonial authorities encouraged the collection of biographies and biographical documents on many colonial “subjects”. Such documents enable us to examine the political control held by the Italian government as well as the reactions of African people at a local level. The biographical material collected by Italian civil servants is a testimony to a policy of control promoted by colonial authorities and to the search for a form of collaboration. We may focus upon the emergence of a clear and fully conscious “indigenous” policy carried out by the Italian government at the beginning of its rule. This policy was expressed through the desire to establish positive relations with colonial “subjects”. At the same time, it was clearly intended to be a form of social

7. The developments of this valuable correspondence in colonial Eritrea is documented in TADDIA (1990, 1997).

8. For a complete list see: “*Archivio Eritrea*”, Ministero degli Affari Esteri — Archivio Storico, Rome, and the catalogue of the unpublished manuscripts conserved in the Library of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

control⁹. Italian colonialism made a particular effort to acquire a precise knowledge of the power structure in precolonial Eritrea.

This is an aspect of the politics of collaboration, coming from the upper level of colonial society down to the “subjects”. The understanding of Eritrean life and social patterns of behaviour became fundamental for colonial power: the collection of data on biographies of precolonial authorities must be regarded as an incentive to studying the society at a local level in order to discover a new political equilibrium.

In other words, in considering this aspect, the political collaboration promoted by the colonial authorities, biographical documents appear to be a unique instrument of colonial policy towards the “*indigeni*” (indigenous people) or Eritrean “*sudditi*” (subjects). In order to propagate a policy of collaboration, a precise knowledge of the precolonial power structure was required. This later became the object, therefore, of considerable discussion in Italian Eritrea. A great deal of documentation on local chieftains written by colonial civil servants came to light and these documents were based on social accounts and historical data of colonised people. Particular attention was given to the private lives, the political contacts and the social relations of the precolonial political authorities.

Italian archives are rich in documents of biographical origin¹⁰. Biographies of the “indigenous” chiefs and important figures, including religious authorities, have been the object of relevant monographs written during the early colonial period. Many files on record in colonial archives testify the creation of a form of political collaboration in Italian Eritrea and the collection of documents dealing with private lives and daily information about the people show this tendency. This material is of considerable importance for the analysis of the social structure and power relations at a local level. Information was gathered by the colonial administration in order to exercise a very rigid control and was expressed through this indirect form.

Many files of great importance related to biographical records in Italian archives may be quoted here¹¹. The collection of biographical material in

9. I have already mentioned this phenomenon from a historical perspective in colonial Eritrea see TADDIA (1988).

10. The major part of these documents are conserved in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Rome, namely in the “*Archivio Storico Africa Italiana*” and “*Archivio Eritrea*”. The “*Archivio Eritrea*” is the only colonial archive that survived in Italy, the others were largely destroyed during the Second World War. It contains valuable documentation on biographical records in many files.

11. Just to mention the most important ones see: L. BELLINI, *Cenni storici sul Tigray e notizie biografiche sulle persone principali e più influenti di questo regno nonché degli altri paesi d'Etiopia che possono avere ingerenza sulla parte futura dell'Eritrea e del Tigray*, Asmara 1892, Archivio Eritrea, Rome, pacco 164; *Biografie dei capi indigeni della colonia Eritrea*, Asmara 1903, Archivio Centrale dello Stato, Rome, Fondo Martini, scat. 8, fasc. 23; Governo della colonia Eritrea, Direzione Affari civili, *Biografie dei capi d'oltreconfine*, Asmara 1903, *ibid.*, scat. 8, fasc. 24; *Lettere e notizie di capi indigeni*, *ibid.*, scat. 16, fasc. 54; Governo dell'Eritrea, *Biografie dei capi d'oltreconfine*, Asmara 1903, Archivio Stor-

the colonial period can be analysed both as a search for a collaborational policy promoted by the Italian administration and at the same time as a means of influencing colonial policy and the “native” administration (Taddia 1998a). We know little about this aspect of colonial history, but the collections of “indigenous biographies” are indicative of a need which was particularly felt during the early colonial period. These biographies represent a body of data which would be difficult to assimilate unless pursued for a specific political purpose. Such documents contain biographical material which was gathered not only in order to maintain power but also to prevent all possible forms of opposition.

The origins of this documentation can be traced back to the fundamental need of the colonial bureaucracy to understand the population over whom its rule was exercised. Both the accurate compilation and the scrupulous conservation of this data testifies to the basic need for such an understanding¹². Moreover, they are representative of an attempt to study the responses of the local elite. Italian colonial authorities made a particular effort to understand the power situation in Eritrea and the political milieu; seen in this light, the government’s demand for information on the local power structure appears as a means of creating a form of efficient colonial policy.

The exercise of “indigenous” power that was determined according to a precise hierarchy was given ample space in the colonial setting. On a political level, Italy as a colonial power did not suppress the existing power structure, indeed she tried instead to modify it. Traditional authorities were considered indispensable as mediators, as well as to serve as instruments of coercion. It was through the local authorities that colonial rule was transmitted. The purpose of the collection of biographical information was to maintain and strengthen the authority of local chieftains or to select new powerful figures according to the different local situations. Precolonial chiefs were able to survive only if they were officially recognized by the colonial administration upon the offer of a salary in return for their allegiance. Once legitimated, the chiefs were endowed with varying degrees of authority, they became responsible for law and order in their territories and were entrusted with the task of promoting colonial law; they served ultimately both as mediators and as a form of guarantee.

The meticulous collection of information involving an extensive web of informers primarily concerned the territory of the Eritrean colony.

ico Ministero Africa Italiana, Rome, Pos. 24/1, fasc. 17; *Raccolta di lettere di capi e di notabili dell’Etiopia*, Archivio Eritrea, Rome, pacco 1042; *Specchi dei capi etiopici 1895-1933*, *ibid.*, pacco 234; *Notizie genealogiche della famiglia Morgani da principio fino ai suoi membri attuali (1922)*, *ibid.*, pacco 1044.

12. See the colonial “registri” for a precise compilation of data collected through colonial informants at the top level of Eritrean society.

Ethiopian Tṣgrai, however, was included later¹³. The aim of this policy was to construct new alliances in Tṣgrai in order to ensure a productive relationship and a peaceful coexistence. The late 19th century was a period of particular importance for the politics of “greater Ethiopia” and explains why the areas south of Mareb—the border river between Eritrea and Ethiopia—were also counted amongst colonial concerns. The settlement of the Eritrean border and the defeat of Adwa paradoxically encouraged the Italian government to control the Ethiopian empire with a view to promoting territorial expansion and a policy of conquest that was never abandoned¹⁴.

This kind of biographical literature appears interesting and unusual in the colonial context: such documentation enables us to acquire a more accurate picture of Eritrean society on the eve of profound transformations brought about by colonial policy. However, this literature is little known to scholars and remains unexploited in Italian and Eritrean archives¹⁵. A close utilisation of colonial files could be of some use for the new generation of scholars of Italian colonialism dealing with African history, not only Italian colonial history, this latter being an approach now dominant in this field of study. The social history of the colony, whose letters and informal documentation can contribute to promote, is a scholarly field of research yet to be approached.

Biographies from Inside: Letters for Constructing a Biographical Itinerary

The second aspect of this work focuses on local literature related to biographical records produced both in Amharic or Tegrēñña¹⁶ during the colonial period concerning the most original aspect of colonial life: the introduction of a new cultural dimension in Ethiopian literature. I will concentrate upon some of this literature that deals with the emergence of a private correspondence in colonial Eritrea in the form of letters exchanged and written by Eritreans themselves that cover many aspects of their private

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13. The role of Tṣgrai in Italian colonial politics must be stressed as it results from the continuous diplomatic relations between Italy and Ethiopian empire after Adwa as manifested in colonial documentation.
 14. Documentation on Tṣgrai and its power structure reveals the intention of Italy to maintain a stable control of this area crucial to colonial interest. See the documentation on Tṣgrai listed in the above note 11 and the Martini papers conserved in Archivio centrale dello Stato in Rome: Fondo Martini, scat. 14, fasc. 47, *Il Tigrāi sotto ras Maconnen 1899-1900* (parte prima) and scat. 14, fasc. 48, *Il Tigrāi sotto ras Maconnen 1899-1900* (parte seconda).
 15. Italian scholars have not exploited the possibility of combining Eritrean and Italian archives on this topic; it could be useful to have a systematic knowledge of both sources available on colonial society and politics.
 16. We must underline that the great part of local literature produced under colonialism is written in Amharic, while Tegrēñña (the other semitic language of Eritrea and northern Ethiopia) is little used in documentary sources.

lives under colonialism. I would then like to discuss the aspect I have already emphasized: local literature related to biographical records expressed in the form of letters.

The correspondence conserved in Italian and Eritrean archives written during the colonial period occupies many files of colonial unpublished documentation. I have already emphasized that letters appear to be a new cultural phenomenon and they are not used in Ethiopia until the 19th Century. The traditional way of communication was oral and we lack private correspondence in historical Ethiopia. In the late 19th Century an observer wrote in his field notes: "Letters are not much used—(of late years [the second part of 19th Century], however, somewhat more frequently)—all correspondence, even at the greatest distance, being confined to verbal communications by confidential messengers"(Plowden 1868: 143)¹⁷.

The emergence of private epistolography is at the origin of a form of literature completely new to modern Ethiopia¹⁸.

We can analyse letters from many aspects:

- First of all, letters are a form of communication; the emergence of written communication can be analysed as a means of cultural transformation.
- Secondly, letters can be taken as a historical source in the full sense.
- Moreover, letters express the feelings of ordinary people. They represent the new voice of a silent majority (the colonised Africans).
- Finally, letters as an expression not of a community, but of individuals, are an unusual phenomenon in African life. They reveal the emergence of a new thinking in modern Ethiopia. In this respect, it is correct to point out the difference between collective memories, private life and personal testimony.

These points deserve close attention. They emphasize the role of biographical data and contribute to giving us more information on colonial milieu. I would like to highlight some aspects of this changing perspective both in Eritrean life and in historical sources available to scholars by pointing out that letters offer us vast material for research. For the first time we have access to material as seen "from the inside" of Eritrean society.

Biographical records are contained in two different sets of documents dealing with correspondence conserved in Italian and Eritrean archives¹⁹. First of all, there is knowledge of letters exchanged among Eritreans themselves that are testimonies of a particular intellectual milieu in colonial Eritrea and reveal personal and political reactions to colonial domination. Secondly, available documentation includes letters addressed from Eritreans

17. For many aspects of this new literature of 19th and 20th Century see TADDIA (1994).

18. For Ethiopian literature of the Menilek period see RUBENSON (1978); GARRETSON (1978).

19. The first file is the Ellero papers conserved at the University of Bologna, History Department, the second one is the regional archive in Addi Qäyyāh, Eritrea. For both see CHELATI DIRAR, GORI & TADDIA (1997).

to the colonial government which are an interesting example of their political attitude towards Italian colonial authorities, as well as providing personal information on living conditions, life styles and means of subsistence of Eritreans in this period.

Regarding the first aspects, the “*Archivio Eritrea*” in Rome has conserved a particular file of letters exchanged among Eritreans at the end of the 19th century²⁰. One must note that there are no examples of such correspondence in Eritrea before this period and that the letters themselves written by Eritreans for the first time during Italian colonialism were greatly influenced by Italian culture. These letters in the first place enable one to reconstruct the colonial milieu, but they also include indirect biographical references. The correspondence among Eritreans is generally linked to colonial matters and is related to colonial domination. It contains information on many aspects of Tегrean society during colonialism testifying to the changes in traditional society.

There are also letters of condolence, greetings, private affairs, political and religious controversies, and of daily business, rich in details and information on the lives of Eritreans themselves. This correspondence offers a clear picture of a new emerging society and reflects the transformations in Eritrean political consciousness. A new type of written culture is linked both to the secularisation of life and the production of new literary sources (Taddia 1990).

Along with references to daily matters and information of a private nature, the letters often include some remarks on the Italian government and political situation. It is interesting to quote here an exchange of correspondence among some Eritrean intellectuals recorded in Italian archives that constitute a primary source and a first hand testimony of the emergence of a new political consciousness linked to the reaffirmation of the integrity of the country against foreign domination. There are two separate files in Italian archives which are interesting from this aspect.

The first documentation contains 56 letters (see *ibid.*: 111 for full quotation) and the second one 11 (*ibid.*: 111-112). Letters are based on the private life of a Tегrean intellectual, *Blatta* Gäbrä Egzi’abḥēr and his role in the emergence of an anticolonial feeling (Negash Tekeste 1986). The intellectual became a fervent nationalist and an active support of Ethiopian independence (Eritrea included) after spending most of his life as a colonial civil servant. The most important correspondence in the file is between Gäbrä Egzi’abḥēr and *Kantiba* Gilay Mika’el, another Tегrean intellectual sharing the same background. The letters, written in code and deciphered by colonial administration, are a clear testimony of private lives under colonialism. This correspondence reveals a particular attitude towards colonialism, as well as the emergence of an ideology of independence of the Ethiopian

20. See “*Archivio Eritrea*”, Rome, Pacco 293, fasc. 4, *Interprete indigeno Garesgh-ear Ghilemariam (attività sospette)* 1899.

state. The factors of resistance against colonial rule, the integrity of the country and national unity are clearly revealed in this correspondence. These letters can be seen as a political phenomenon and may be considered as a clear testimony to the emergence of a new mode of thought among Eritrean intellectuals during colonialism.

The correspondence provides us with valuable information on the Ethiopian historical situation and for the first time mention is made of the personal opinions that people had on internal politics and the Italian government. This kind of literature is mainly intellectual and can be seen as a testimony to a new form of ideology that was independent of political power. Moreover, and this is more interesting in this context, such documentation is an example of the emergence of personal information in Ethiopian literature and therefore is valuable to both the intellectual and social history of the colony. The emergence of such private correspondence represented the most interesting aspect of Ethiopian culture and society in modern times.

No other earlier examples of private correspondence dealing with the daily lives of people exist in Ethiopian historical records. Ethiopian history has so far mainly been analysed through the use of European sources. Given the different nature of local sources, their emergence has led to a transformation in the kind of information available for the same period. It is interesting to point out that the development of personal information in a written form is connected with the rise of colonialism.

Colonialism must be seen as an important factor in influencing local source material. What was the importance of colonialism in the reconstruction of this new secular literature? Private letters may be considered as a modern form of expression that were influenced by political events and contributed to the secularisation of Ethiopian literature. For a general consideration on modern Ethiopian literature up to the times of Menilek (1889-1913), official literature was prevalent, *i.e.* court chronicles or religious texts, and political literature only emerged in modern Ethiopia during the times of Haile Selassie, in the 1930's.

The rise of informal, biographical literature reveals some of the most interesting aspects of a changing Ethiopia and the influence of colonialism in this process. The Eritrean intellectuals themselves described their lives through biographical notes, letters, diaries and this is the beginning of a new form of literature in Ethiopia²¹.

The correspondence exchanged among Eritreans themselves can be considered as a rare documentary source, making Eritrea different from other African colonies. Moreover, these letters represent a substantial shift

21. Among the informal literature the diary of Kantiba Gila Mika'el must be quoted as an important document in colonial Eritrea; see: TADDIA (1994). For the development of Ethiopian sources in the 19th Century see RUBENSON (1978), BAIRU TAFLA (1987) and GARRETSON (1978).

in the nature of Ethiopian source material and have to be located within a specific colonial context. Their role is significant both for the content and the style of writing; the information they provide is an emerging theme of discussion in African studies (Taddia 1990).

There are few comparisons in African studies from this point of view. Among the recently published work dealing with the rise of private letter writing, we may mention the material from Sudan, although a different approach qualifies Spaulding's published material (Spaulding 1993). Nonetheless, the documents have something in common, because Spaulding suggests "letters from Echo Island [. . .] do offer sound contemporary evidence concerning the conscious and subjective views of individuals about events in which they participated, including several types of events also identified as significant by historical analysis [. . .]" (*ibid.*: 133). This is the case of my documentation on Eritrean experience under colonialism.

Private correspondence began to appear only after the mid 19th century in Ethiopia, if we exclude official letters exchanged among rulers: it therefore runs parallel to colonialism. Other authors have also noted this coincidence²². It is interesting to draw attention to the consequences of the introduction of writing in private communication in Africa. The use of correspondence changes the relationships among people and strengthens personal relations: time and space appear to have different perspectives in the development of this new form of communication.

The So-called "*Lettere tigrine*"

The second set of documents in local literature I refer to in this article deals with a collection of letters conserved in two separate archives—the Ellero papers in Bologna and the Addi Qäyyäh archive in Eritrea—originally entitled "*Lettere tigrine*"²³. In spite of this colonial denomination, the great bulk of the correspondence is written in Amharic²⁴. Both files include a large amount of letters addressed from Eritrean "subjects" to the Italian government. In general, they were local political figures who referred to Italian bureaucracy for many reasons such as political and legal matters or

22. The reference to colonialism is clear in Spaulding material: "The private epistolography of Echo island emerged in about 1860 when the geographical scale at which the islanders were obliged to function dramatically increased, but this is better understood as a response to a new colonial world imposed upon them [Echo island people] by the Turks than as a necessary consequence of the technique of literacy itself" (1993: 134).

23. The Ellero papers are a private collection of the family Ellero-Pezzoli conserved now at the University of Bologna, Dipartimento di Discipline Storiche. The Addi Qäyyäh archive is the regional archive of the region of Akkälä Guzay in the Eritrean highlands.

24. In the Ellero documentation 10 letters only are written in Tefreñña among 287 documents.

their daily living conditions. This material highlights an unusual aspect of colonial history, *i.e.* the local responses to colonial domination documented through local written source material, a rare phenomenon in colonial sub-Saharan Africa. It is a first hand testimony of the silent voice of colonised people and documents the way in which colonialism transformed the cultural and social pattern of living as well as the system of interpersonal communications.

Tegreans living in Asmara at the end of the 19th century had a direct experience of colonialism and were thus profoundly affected by it in their ways of thinking and living: they have expressed these feelings in a written form recorded in colonial archives. The memory of colonialism is therefore enriched through this first hand documentation. Historians should not rely only on oral data or European documents. This is a peculiarity of modern Ethiopia: a new form of literature emerges in the context of colonialism and the exercise of political power.

Both sets of documents, the Ellero papers and the Addi Qäyyḥ archive, highlight the responses of Africans to colonialism and their personal attitudes. The “*Lettere tigrine*” represent a source of great importance to historians of modern Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea. In fact, these documents enable us to reconstruct the lives of “ordinary” people in the Italian colony and clearly represent their changing social conditions. Letters are written for particular purposes linked to colonial life, but interesting biographical material can be found indirectly in these documents.

The correspondence conserved in the Ellero papers consists of a great number of sources, 287 letters addressed from colonial “subjects” to the Italian government²⁵. The regional archive in Addi Qäyyḥ is equally valuable and includes in seven different files, named “*Lettere tigrine*”²⁶, 227 letters that are mostly of a bureaucratic nature and reveal the beginnings

25. For a first account of this documentation see TADDIA (1993) and DORE (1993). The catalogue of the Ethiopian material has been recently published: CHELATI DIRAR, GORI & TADDIA (1997). For an analysis of the role of letters in Ethiopian documentation see Taddia (1997).

26. See the catalogue of this documentation compiled by Acberet Seyum that can be consulted in Asmara at the “*Centro di studi etiopici*” of Fratel Ezio Tonini. The importance of this documentation has been mentioned in TADDIA (1998b). For the files that are relevant to this context, see “*Lettere tigrine al Commissariato*” as follows: “*Lettere tigrine 1899*” file 1. 5. 1; “*Lettere tigrine dicembre 1899*” file 1. 5. 2; “*Lettere con Fitaaurari Ailu 1902*” file 6. 4. 3; “*Lettere con Degiazmac Desta*” file 6. 5. 4; “*Lettere amariche di gente della colonia di oggetto vario 1902*” file 7. 27. 5; “*Lettere tigrine 1904*” file 10. 12. 6; “*Lettere tigrine 1903*” file 87. 9. 7. See note 19 above. The regional Archive of Addi Qäyyḥ has been recently relocated in Addi Ugri, following the general re-arrangement of regions and provinces in Eritrea after the reform of 1995. For this reason it is presently closed to scholars and is in the process of being reshelfed and recatalogued. In spite of the relocation of this archive in Addi Ugri, I continue to quote the original catalogation.

of a clearly confidential relationship between Eritreans and the Italian government.

Colonial Eritrea has been the object of historical work mainly focused upon Italian documentation and based on the study of political relationships. The local situation has been given little consideration by scholars²⁷. These files, however, give an opportunity to reconsider the impact of colonial politics at the local level and the role of Italian colonialism in shaping precolonial society. In particular, these sources highlight the rise of a new form of social class in Eritrea, that is to say the class emerging within colonialism and because of colonial policy. This class uses literacy as the main means of communication. This is the beginning of a new phenomenon that deserves to be investigated in a proper way²⁸.

These writings of bureaucratic origin must be analysed as valuable sources for documenting colonial interaction with local political structure: it seems to me that this material is particularly interesting from this respect and constitutes a first hand documentation. Although bureaucratic in their origin, both colonial archives are useful for the reconstruction of a historical dimension that is also private in nature; they are fundamental therefore to the understanding of the experience of colonised people in the context of Italian Eritrea, a topic under-researched in contemporary literature. These documents reveal close attention to social details²⁹. This correspondence headed under both files as "*Lettere tigrine*" can help to analyse a particular colonial situation and a precise political response to colonialism. These responses were of a different nature, as I will examine later.

The way in which both collections are documented share many characteristics and this material can therefore be considered as a unique corpus of documents³⁰. These letters are an unusual source: first of all regarding their content, secondly the literary form that is uncommon in colonial Africa. I would like to analyse both these aspects, taking a wider approach that combines the analysis of the meaning expressed in this correspondence with some remarks on this literary expression in Ethiopian/Eritrean cultural history.

27. Evidence is shown in the analysis of Italian historiography starting from A. Del Boca to N. Labanca whose recent *In marcia verso Adua* (1992) is still based on colonial sources.

28. For more details on this historical process see TADDIA (1997: 15-20).

29. See the abstract of the letters in CHELATI DIRAR, GORI & TADDIA (1997: 31-140). A catalogue of the documentation of Akkälä Guzay is available at the History Department of the University of Bologna.

30. The files "*Lettere tigrine*" are conserved in two separate archives, one in Italy and the other one in Eritrea, but they appear to me to have been collected by the same person, I would suggest Ellero himself, the last colonial Residente in Addi Qäyy^ቃ and seem to have been separated by chance after the death of Ellero and the aftermath of the Second World War. The historical period covered in both files of documents is the same; documents refer to the identical areas, the system of catalogation, translation and inventory are the same. This historical patrimony represents a cultural heritage of colonialism.

With regard to the construction of a new equilibrium of power in colonial Eritrea, two aspects of the political interaction between colonial government and Eritreans can be identified. I have already discussed the research of a policy of collaboration promoted by colonial authorities and directed to Eritrean "subjects"³¹.

However, little research has been carried out on the other aspect of this interrelation: the collaboration induced by the "spontaneous" response of colonised people to foreign authorities, as a local reaction towards colonialism. We can speak of the emergence of a new political attitude at grass roots level. So far, few documents are known that deal with the complexity of reactions of Eritreans themselves to the colonial challenge and more generally with the "indigenous" response to colonialism. The historical research is at the beginnings (Negash 1983, 1987; Taddia 1998a).

Therefore, these "*Lettere tigrine*" seem to be politically significant and are an important testimony to the role played by precolonial power structure—traditional chieftains—in the context of colonial politics. They represent a good opportunity to rediscuss Italian colonialism in Eritrea (1890-1941).

In general, they were local political figures who referred to the Italian bureaucracy for many reasons, for instance their daily living conditions and political and legal matters, as well as the request for various permits.

Italy is invoked as the arbiter in land disputes, in commercial transactions, in deciding rights over grazing lands and more generally in everyday matters. The correspondence concerns both political relations and local issues, such as customs, transit permits, punishment of thieves, runaways and disputes over stock. Much of this correspondence deals with the exchange of personal information on the living conditions of Eritrean people which is an unusual aspect in colonial records. Both aspects coexist: private and political matters are interwoven in the documentation³².

Many recorded letters emphasize an aspect of colonial domination that appears to be rather unusual, the attempt to create a form of collaboration and a politics of compromise carried out by Eritreans towards colonial authorities. From this correspondence we can deduce the role played by many individuals having different degrees of authority and prestige in precolonial society and their aspirations for a new political role within the colonial context. The opportunity to write to colonial government represents for many Eritreans an occasion to emerge as a political entity in respect to a new situation of power. The search for a new status, a new prestige and a new political authority seem to be an incentive for many Eritreans to take advantage of colonialism.

31. This first aspect is emphasized in the previous section "Biographies from outside". See notes 9 and 11 above.

32. For an analysis of this aspect see TADDIA (1997, 1998a).

In fact resistance was not a generalized reaction of African colonial subjects to European domination and colonialism is not characterised by a unique response³³. We also find in African society some people who offer allegiance to the Italian government in return for privileges and honours, and by doing this become the guarantor of the social order in the colony. We have to stress that the attitudes of Eritreans towards colonialism were in many cases those of compromise and collaboration. Such an attitude can be seen as the most original aspect emerging from this documentation, a point which I would like to underline in the discussion of the sources.

When we analyse a peculiar historical context and a precise colonial situation, we need to observe a complex web of relations between colonial government and Africans. African societies were of a more flexible nature during colonialism and took advantage of colonial power, emerging as valuable political mediators. On the other hand, colonial government promoted a policy of consensus and created a new equilibrium of power: the result was the emergence of a complex society, an interaction of the colonial and the "indigenous" society. The material under study documents the construction of colonial power in 20th Century Eritrea (Taddia 1997, 1998a), a process in fieri. Letters are at the same time one of the few recorded responses to colonial domination.

Many of the original letters addressed from colonial "subjects" to the Italian government have historical importance³⁴. I have just mentioned one interesting aspect that emerges when analysing the content of the letters in terms of political relations³⁵. It is possible to make a different interpretation of the material and offer a different insight, based on the role of letters in the context of Amharic literature (rare Tegrēñña) in modern Eritrea. These sources are relevant not only for their content, but also for their structure.

Colonialism is a cause of change in local literature; it changed the nature of documents useful to historians and contributed to the process of secularisation of local culture. The emergence of such sources resulted in the transformation of the nature of historical knowledge. Colonialism creates in Ethiopian culture a model of bureaucratic writing in the exercise of power which was unknown to the previous period³⁶. In addition to historical-cultural factors, the process of secularisation was influenced and implemented through Amharic becoming a common language in Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea, where it continued to be the main written language, the language of power and bureaucracy. These documents are a testimony of

33. For a recent review of different perspectives on colonialism see COOPER (1994: 1516-1545) and MBEMBE (1988).

34. See the abstract in CHELATI DIRAR, GORI & TADDIA (1997).

35. See the previous pages of this article, but I have developed this argument in a more systematic form in TADDIA (1998a).

36. For the beginnings of literacy within the government organisation of independent Ethiopia in the 19th Century see McCANN (1998: 15-22).

this linguistic evolution and contribute to improving our knowledge of historical developments of the main language in Ethiopia.

These new documents therefore represent a substantial shift in the nature of Ethiopian society and culture and have to be located within a specific colonial context. The emergence of an informal literature—such as represented by letters—coincides significantly with the beginnings of colonial rule in Eritrea and a stronger European influence in independent Ethiopia. Up to now, the relationship between the emergence of a new kind of literature and Italian colonialism has not been taken into consideration by scholars³⁷. In fact, letters may be considered as a modern form of expression influenced by political events and complete the process of secularisation of Ethiopian literature at the turn of the century.

The analysis of the role of correspondence in Ethiopian historiography is not a new theme of research. The previous literature has already taken into consideration letters as a source of history (Rubenson 1987, 1994; Girma-Selassie & Appleyard 1979; Appleyard & Irvine 1985). In the last years there have been some efforts to publish collections of these sources previously neglected in contemporary research.

I would like to emphasize that the documentation I deal with here greatly differs from the material published by scholars so far, concerning the exchange of letters based on official documentation and diplomatic records, within the context of international diplomacy and European/Ethiopian relations. As far as we know, in modern Ethiopia official letters were exchanged between rulers for political purposes, but there are no references made to similar correspondence among less important figures of independent Ethiopia and colonial Eritrea. The great bulk of Ethiopian letters that have been considered so far were of historical significance and represented the official milieu. They were letters exchanged between outstanding political figures who played an important role in diplomatic history (Rubenson 1987, 1994).

Published correspondence has considered official letters only, based on official documentation, and has included letters exchanged for a particular purpose, mainly for diplomatic relations or international treaties. Diplomatic records, within the context of international diplomacy and European/Ethiopian relations in modern times, offer such examples of documentation based on an exchange of letters. We must stress however, that among his recently published works, Rubenson includes in his source material a small number of private letters that were of no diplomatic relevance, but this is an exception. These documents according to the author are important: they talk of the “daily life and social affairs of people of various classes” and reveal “changes in the intellectual and political climate, in the mentality of the Ethiopians in general and in their attitude towards and knowledge about the outside world in particular” (Rubenson 1987: “Introduction”: IX-XVII). This can be seen to be the beginning of an approach to be further encouraged.

37. For the development of this concept see TADDIA (1994).

Furthermore, the letters in the Rubenson collection were mainly those written by Europeans to outstanding figures in Ethiopian society; less frequently vice versa, a correspondence addressed from African political authorities to Europeans³⁸. Totally absent in the published correspondence is an exchange of letters among Africans themselves³⁹.

On the contrary, the documentary sources I am dealing with in this context talk about the daily life of people who had no official connections with political authorities and those without any official commitments to a political power and who played a secondary role in colonial history. There are some minor figures in Eritrean political and cultural life who write to Italian civil servants. The senders of these letters lack an institutional power in precolonial society and play an unofficial role, nonetheless they do not appear to be irrelevant to historians. Furthermore, we have already emphasized that Africans writing to Europeans is an exception according to published documentation⁴⁰. This change can be explained by colonialism and the requirements of colonial power at the local level.

Contemporary historiography has analysed the reactions to colonial domination of the local élite, of the precolonial ruling class in respect to the new situation of power caused by Italians. The reactions of secondary people have been completely neglected because they are difficult to record with the use of official documents only. The historiography of daily life during colonialism has recently been developed particularly in anglophone Africa. We have a number of works that deal with destructured responses to colonial domination⁴¹. These works are mainly based on a collection of oral testimonies as a primary source. The Eritrean colony, on the contrary, give us the opportunity to record, through a written source, a large variety of responses to colonialism. This seems to be a unique phenomenon in colonial Africa.

Another point to be developed is that letters are written to the government and in this respect they could be considered official documents. However, in another sense these documents can be regarded as private documents, although addressed to a colonial authority, because they do not represent the official milieu or the ideology of a community, but are totally conceived on an individual basis. This is a new historical phenomenon in 20th Century Africa. The letters reveal an unofficial and individual way of thinking and are the expression of a personal opinion not shared on a social level. Letters appear to be a unique reaction to colonialism, a private

38. Rubenson's documentation contains many letters exchanged from Europeans to Africans and only very few letters viceversa.

39. This seems to me the most original aspect of my documentation, although these letters are very few in number.

40. This is the most important characteristic in the nature of correspondence; because of colonialism, Africans are incentivated to use some of the means of colonial power, the exercise of writing included.

41. I have listed an extensive bibliography on this topic in TADDIA (1996).

testimony of historical events, they do not represent the memory of a community or the expression of people in power. This is a considerable change in the African traditional milieu.

On the other hand, seen from the colonial point of view, this correspondence documents the beginning of a new secular form of administration and the emergence of a new type of bureaucratic power. Private bureaucratic correspondence is the proper term for this form of emerging literacy at the turn of the century.

Documents and Meanings: Texts and Contexts

The Ellero material and the Addis Qäyyḥ papers reflect an important shift in the nature of our documentation. The exceptionality of these documents must be stressed: the “*Lettere tigrine*” deserve close analysis⁴² and many of them have historical relevance⁴³. Letters constitute an important legacy as first hand documents on colonialism.

The 287 letters preserved in the Ellero documentation are written from various areas of colonial Eritrea and independent Ethiopia. The *Residenza* of Akkälä Guzay, however, is largely predominant, and very few documents originate from Ḥamasen and Särayä⁴⁴. Consequently, most of the letters are addressed to the Italian *Residente*—the main colonial authority—of Akkälä Guzay or other administrative figures of the region in which the Italian civil servant was active. They are therefore a testimony of a precise intention of Ellero to collect documents in his administrative area and can explain the discovery of such a documentation⁴⁵. In fact Ellero was an administrator in Akkälä Guzay, but not in Ḥamasen or Särayä. Therefore, the documentation is restricted to his area of government.

42. The exceptionality is referred to other African areas, in which it is possible to find other material of similar origin, but on a casual basis and in a less systematic way. We have proceeded so far to the new catalogation and investigation of the Ellero material in Bologna only, while the Addi Qäyyḥ archive requires re-analysis and recataloguing. For an introduction to Eritrean letters see TADDIA (1993). For a comprehensive catalogue of the Ellero's material see CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997) and TADDIA (1997).

43. The historical significance of some letters lies in the political importance of some of the senders, but taken as a whole, the corpus of documentation is relevant as a first example of a response to colonial rule.

44. CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997): for the letters from Ḥamasen see document number 125 and from Särayä documents 21, 71, 131, 137, 258.

45. Other colonial administrators have left interesting documentary material, but the importance of the Ellero documentation is mainly based on this corpus of documents (and unpublished field notes on Wälqayt). See CHELATI DIRAR & DORE (forthcoming). Ellero's papers were left in the colony during the Second World War and brought back to his family in Bologna who conserved them up to recent years. For other relevant colonial papers collected by Italian civil servants see the bibliography in TADDIA (1986).

The documents cover a large period, that of the years between the Menilek era and the beginnings of the 20th Century. The earliest letter dates back to 1885 whereas the most recent one dates to the period of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia in 1941 (European calendar)⁴⁶.

The documents are conserved in the original version. Letters include in most cases the sender's signature and the seal to clearly confirm the authenticity of the message. A collection of seals is preserved in the Ellero documentation as well as an unpublished Ellero manuscript on the historical significance of Ethiopian seals⁴⁷. Apart from the original documentation, many files record the Italian translation of the letters provided by colonial bureaucracy⁴⁸. Sometimes notes are added in the margin to explain contexts and situations of colonial life and some comments are referred to colonial times. Only a few letters exchanged among Eritreans themselves are to be found in the original file; such cases are exceptional⁴⁹, given the nature of the correspondence generally addressed from Eritreans to colonial authorities.

Among 287 documents few letters (ten only) are written in Tegrēñña⁵⁰. Colonial Eritreans write in their mother language in a few cases only, as far as we know⁵¹. All documents are still very well preserved, in spite of the length of time and bad conditions of conservation. All letters are recorded, catalogued and dated by the colonial administration.

There are mainly local authorities referring to Italian bureaucracy for a number of reasons dealing with the exercise of daily life and colonial requirements. It is interesting to note that women appear very rarely as senders of messages; those few are mainly referred to as the wives of important figures at a local level⁵².

The opportunities of writing messages to colonial bureaucracy are many: formal relations such as the exchange of greetings and gifts are followed

46. See the oldest document number 261 and the recent one 286.

47. For the reproduction of the main seals see CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997: 179-184). Giovanni Ellero's unpublished article on seals is conserved in Italian documentation; see CHELATI DIRAR & DORE (forthcoming). This unpublished manuscript is a systematic study of Ethiopian seals, very accurate and precise; the approach to the study of seals appears to be innovative. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, sponsored by Dr. Gianfranco Ellero (Giovanni Ellero brother) intends to edit and comment this work on the basis of Ellero's documentation.

48. Colonial translation is common to many relevant documents of the period conserved in Italian archives and testimonies to the accuracy of Italian bureaucracy in colonial matters.

49. Letters from Eritreans to Eritreans are listed as follows: CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997), documents 84, 122, 136, 219, 267, 268, 269, 280, 282, 283, 287.

50. For Tegrēñña documents see 11, 15, 125, 143, 154, 155, 156, 163, 168, 263.

51. Among the few Tegrēñña documents of colonial period see CONTI ROSSINI (1904); other documents are listed in L. RICCI, "Letterature dell'Etiopia", in O. BOTTO (1969: 883-887). Among the documentation I came across related to the colonial period, few documents are written in Tegrēñña: see their mention in TADDIA (1990, 1997).

52. For women's correspondence see CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997), documents 40, 77, 90, 106, 119, 124, 207, 234, 244.

by the request for favours, benefits, subsidies, food and arms⁵³. The documents also include mention of political and legal issues, requests for arbitration⁵⁴ and various demands for building houses and churches⁵⁵ or invoking the role of Italy in religious disputes over ecclesiastical jurisdiction⁵⁶. It is interesting to note here the presence of explicit testimony favourable to Italians⁵⁷, declarations of submission to the colonial authority⁵⁸, promises of loyalty and demonstrations of political availability⁵⁹. Some formal oaths to colonial government are included in the correspondence⁶⁰.

Moreover, Italy is requested as mediator in various controversies, in matters dealing with daily life, in punishments of thieves⁶¹, issues related to land disputes⁶². Our recent work lists and refers to all documents and includes a brief comment on the content of letters and their historical significance (Chelati Dirar *et al.* 1997). This is the construction of a network of relationships, the expression of a complex of attitudes, manifestations, original ways of seeing and thinking that emerge at a conscious level.

We can indicate some significant documents: letter 31 of *fitawrari* Kidanu Heset to *Commissario* Tornari (Chelati Dirar *et al.* 1997: 42) in which complete loyalty to the Italians is reasserted; letter 76 of *balambaras* Tesfai to *Commissario* Tonini (*ibid.*: 59-60) in which a personal annuity is asked from the Italian authorities in exchange for the service of protection of public order in the colony. Another two documents testify the positive attitude towards colonial government expressed through a precise political collaboration: letter 241 of *däggiazmačč*; Abraha and letter 242 of *däggiazmačč*; Gugsä, both addressed to Italian *Residente* De Rossi (*ibid.*: 123-124). Other documents deal with the concern to develop a precise native politics towards Tegrean authority: letter 240 deals with the convocation of native authorities in Woggerat (*ibid.*: 123). Other letters relating to convocations of local chiefs or the need to establish positive relations with them in order to improve mutual aid are important⁶³. Some letters require information on local chiefs from other local chiefs⁶⁴. Precolonial authority is transformed as a means of control of other authorities not yet subject to colonial government.

53. *Ibid.*, documents 3, 6, 7, 8, 12, 17, 23, 25, 30, 32, 33, 41, 48, 56, 73, 80, 93, 98, 144, 173, 177, 188, 194.

54. *Ibid.*, documents 1, 4, 35, 66, 140, 143, 146, 160, 182, 222, 257, 263.

55. *Ibid.*, documents 87, 97, 101, 157, 162, 166, 230.

56. Among the most important documents see a letter from Däbrä Libanos, number 17, and another from Enda Yohannes, Tedrer, number 15 (*ibid.*).

57. *Ibid.*, documents 27, 36, 52, 53, 96, 105, 106, 107, 118, 135, 195, 251.

58. *Ibid.*, documents 62, 133, 205, 256, 266, 270, 271, 283, 284, 285.

59. *Ibid.*, documents 14, 22, 26, 78, 144, 145, 154, 156, 193, 229, 272.

60. *Ibid.*, documents 141, 203.

61. *Ibid.*, documents 10, 16, 24, 28, 226, 237.

62. *Ibid.*, documents 139, 147, 181, 250.

63. *Ibid.*, documents 240, 241, 242.

64. *Ibid.*, documents 5, 192, 205.

Of interest is the presence of religious authority in the dual guise of protagonist of colonial influence or, on the contrary, as a critical element⁶⁵. It is difficult to register the main political attitude of the Ethiopian Church to Italian government: we do not have sufficient documentation to support any thesis and very few studies are available on this matter (Marongiu Buonaiuti 1982; Chelati Dirar 1995). The role of the Orthodox Church in respect to colonial government still requires critical analysis. Concerning Ellero's documentation, the religious authority appears to be the main active protagonist of opposition: see document 17, *memher* Gabra Sadeq to Italian *Residente* (Chelati Dirar *et al.* 1997: 36-37) clearly emphasizing the opposition to *gult* land expropriation, and letter 15, *mehmer* Gäbrä Heywat to Italian *Residente* addressing a note of protest to Italian government for omitting to help the monastic community and not properly benefiting monastic life⁶⁶ (*ibid.*: 36). Other documents written by the religious authority emphasize a clear sympathy and friendship towards Italian government⁶⁷.

Another significant testimony is recorded from the border area of Təgrai, a privileged area within the colonial administration. These are mainly letters of friendship and express good will towards the Italian government, in testimony of a kind of collaboration in case of an expansion of Italian political power⁶⁸. Other areas appear in the correspondence, such as Gondar and Aksum. Through the documentation just one letter is written by an important political figure, *ras* Mäkwännēn, addressed to *Tenente* Sapelli⁶⁹. Finally, some letters are sent to Ellero himself⁷⁰ on various political and administrative matters.

These documents are of varying importance: the colonial file contains about 30 letters that clearly reveal political collaboration by Eritrean subjects towards colonial authorities⁷¹. The spontaneous attitude of collaboration is a common theme of daily life and in some cases involves political

65. The dynamics between the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Ethiopian Church in Italian colonies remain a controversial matter and the documentation under discussion does not offer new themes for reflexion.

66. For *gult* (grant of land assigned in return for service) in Eritrea see CARBONE (1940) and TADDIA (1999). For a critical discussion on *gult* in Ethiopia see CRUMMEY (2000). Alessandro Bausi and Gianfrancesco Lusini have published a number of articles on the Eritrean land tenure documentation in the last issues of *Africa* (Rome) and *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici*. Quoted in TADDIA (1999).

67. CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997): documents 105, 143, 199, 229.

68. See the most important documents from Təgrai: letter 27 from Kasay Negusse to Italian Commissario Tonini (*ibid.*: 40-41) and letter 78 from dāḡḡiazmačč Hagwas Tafari to Italian *Residente* (*ibid.*: 60-61). Other documents from Təgrai (most of them before 1936 when Təgrai was included in the Italian empire): 3, 6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 23, 33, 38, 42, 45, 46, 47, 58, 60, 72, 75, 81, 97, 102, 106, 123, 124, 141, 144, 145, 183, 185, 201, 203, 206, 208, 220, 225, 229, 231, 239, 244, 251, 253, 255.

69. See letter 13 (*ibid.*). Ras Mäkwännēn was Menilek's relative and the father of the future Emperor Haylā Sellase.

70. See respectively letters 265, 266, 270, 271, 273, 274, 278, 281, 284, 286 (*ibid.*).

71. See the discussion of this theme in TADDIA (1997: 18-19).

implications. The construction of colonial power needs collaboration and it is this phenomenon which emerges as the most relevant unknown aspect of colonial literature.

Along with these forms of collaboration, some letters include elements of dissent towards colonial domination. All forms of protest appear to be difficult to record, given their nature, and colonial power aimed to hide the protest in Africa rather than manifest this attitude. Moreover, we can find some significant letters, mainly from the religious authorities, which are clearly against Italians, as already mentioned (Chelati Dirar *et al.* 1997: 36-37). These are some elements which are interesting to analyse, but difficult to contextualise in colonial Eritrea.

Within the dynamics of collaboration and resistance, the case of Mesfin Redda seems significant and is largely documented⁷². This case testifies an unsteady equilibrium in colonial politics between resistance and collaboration and its political itinerary is symbolic of a class whose attitude was very uncertain and flexible. Like other documents, this testimony too is of valuable importance: a testimony that emphasize a peculiar reaction to colonial domination. Colonialism seems at the same time a private phenomenon and a historical event. Therefore the number of documents available to historians testify to the extreme variety and complexity of the human condition among the colonised people.

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72. See CHELATI DIRAR *et al.* (1997): documents 62, 265, 267, 268, 269, 270, 271, 273, 274, 275, 276, 278.

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ABSTRACT

Recent developments in African studies have taken into account a new type of source and the emergence of a new phenomenon in 19th Century Africa such as the birth of a private epistolography. The author develops this theme in relation to Italian Eritrea. A conspicuous number of letters (the great majority in Amharic, Tegrēñña is an exception) addressed from colonial "subjects" to Italian administration preserved in two different Archives, in Italy and Eritrea, testify to the use of correspondence as a new phenomenon in colonial Africa.

The emergence of a private correspondence in Italian Eritrea reveals the political attitude of Eritreans towards colonial government, shows many aspects of daily life and offers biographical material that is very rare in available literature.

The author discusses the importance of this unpublished and under-investigated documentation that testifies to the extreme variety and complexity of the human condition of colonised people.

RÉSUMÉ

La correspondance : une nouvelle source de l'histoire africaine. — De récents développements des études africaines concernent un nouveau type de source correspondant à l'émergence d'un phénomène original, en Afrique au XIX^e siècle, à savoir la naissance d'une correspondance épistolaire privée. L'auteur analyse cet aspect dans l'Érythrée italienne. Un nombre énorme de lettres (la plupart étant écrites en amharigue, le tegrēñña demeurant une exception) furent adressées par des « sujets » coloniaux à l'administration italienne et furent stockées dans deux centres d'archives différents, en Italie et en Érythrée, montrant ainsi que la correspondance était un phénomène nouveau en Afrique coloniale.

L'existence d'une correspondance privée en Érythrée italienne nous informe sur l'attitude politique des Érythréens envers l'administration coloniale et nous révèle également de nombreux aspects de la vie quotidienne. Elle offre, en outre, un matériau biographique qu'on rencontre rarement dans la littérature.

L'auteur examine l'importance de cette documentation non publiée et non exploitée, laquelle atteste de l'extrême variété et complexité des peuples colonisés.

Keywords/mots-clés: Collaboration, colonialism, compromise, daily life (of Italian subjects), common people, epistolography, Eritrea, precolonial authority, religious authority, resistance, unusual colonial sources, written memories/*Autorité religieuse, collaboration, colonialisme, compromis, étude épistolaire, Érythrée, gouvernement précolonial, peuple, résistance, sources coloniales nouvelles, souvenirs écrits, vie quotidienne (de « sujets » italiens).*